

ARIZONA VETERANS' SERVICE ADVISORY COMMISSION
BPOE Lodge #2065, 1 Elks Lane, Sierra Vista AZ
Saturday - January 12, 2008

M I N U T E S

Call to Order - The meeting was called to order at 10:00 a.m. by Chairman Dingwall.

Present

Advisory Commissioners

Tom Dingwall
Kenneth Yamanouchi
Gary Fredericks
Phillip Quochoytewa
Webb Ellis
Tom Heaney
Larry McKim
Linda Fulkerson
Bill Lunsford

Arizona Department of Veterans' Services

Joe Larson, Administrator, Southern AZ
Veterans Memorial Cemetery
Luella Emmons, Veterans Benefits Counselor
Lee Borgen, Veterans Benefits Counselor

Opening – Chairman Dingwall invited members of the audience to introduce themselves. Attendees included James Currieo, Assistant Office Manager for Senator McCain's Tucson office, Shay Saucedo, Constituent Services Manager for Congressman Gifford's office, Pat Call, Cochise County Supervisor, Rick Mueller, Sierra Vista Mayor pro tem, Linda Reynolds, Assistant Director at VAMC Tucson, Alicia Miller, Admin. Officer for the Community Based Outpatient Clinics and Deborah Lown, Eligibility Coordinator from VAMC Tucson.

Chairman Dingwall asked the Commissioners to introduce themselves with a brief bio.

Chairman Dingwall thanked the Elks for their hospitality and Commissioners McKim and Heaney for their hard work in setting up the meeting.

Minutes - The minutes of December 13, 2007 were approved as distributed with minor corrections. (Approval moved by Commissioner McKim and seconded by Commissioner Fulkerson.)

Chairman Dingwall advised that we are a State agency and can not deal with Federal issues. He emphasized that the presence of VAMC Tucson staff members was greatly appreciated as VA medical care is a prominent topic at every regional meeting.

Chairman Dingwall advised that the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS) has a new Director and provided a brief outline of Director Maxon's five imperatives:

- Establish and maintain operational and fiscal stability for the State Veteran Home.
- Grow the client base of the Fiduciary section.
- Hire, train and place the newly authorized Veterans' Benefits Counselors in underserved areas. We are looking at putting a VBC in Safford and Show Low. We are also looking at the possibility of a large van rigged as an office to serve the extreme rural areas like northeastern Arizona.
- Develop and implement an aggressive Veterans' Business program. There are numerous Federal programs to support disabled-veteran businesses. New Mexico has a program for finding disabled veteran business owners and connecting them with Federal programs. They hold seminars on how to do business with the Federal Government and provide benefits counselors on site at the seminars to file claims for people to get veteran business

owners into the disability system. We are going to partner with the Dept. of Commerce, Small Business Administration and other key players to develop a similar program for Arizona. Such a program has huge potential for bringing more Federal dollars into Arizona's economy.

- Aggressively pursue certification of governmental and private sector training programs for GI Bill approval. Our State Approving Agency is the certifying agency for education and training in Arizona. They determine if a program is eligible for GI Bill participation.

Chairman Dingwall then asked audience members to please use the green comment/question cards so that we may get back to people with desired information. An attendee asked if it he could video tape and record the meeting. Chairman Dingwall affirmed that certainly video taping or recording was permissible. He also introduced Lee Borgen and advised that she would be taking minutes, but asked that attendees complete the comments cards with names and contact information.

Chairman Dingwall asked Senator McCain's representative if he would like to make any comments. Mr. Currieo advised that the Senator's office is there to assist everyone and asked that people contact the Tucson office rather than the Senator's Washington DC office so that local staff may be involved. All that is needed to petition the Senator's help is a signed privacy act form with a written statement of the problem and contact information. Mr. Currieo advised that he had privacy act forms with him for people to take for personal use or give to someone else. Chairman Dingwall thanked Mr. Currieo for his presence and asked that our thanks be passed on to the Senator.

Chairman Dingwall then turned the meeting over to Commissioner McKim and Commissioner Heaney.

Commissioner McKim thanked Mr. Currieo for attending. He then asked Congresswoman Gifford's representative, Shay Saucedo if she wished to make any comments. Mrs. Saucedo advised that Congresswoman Gifford's office stands ready to assist in any way possible. If there are any questions please call; it is always worth asking questions.

Commissioner McKim solicited comments from Linda Reynolds, Assistant Director of VAMC Tucson. She advised that Tucson has six clinics and they all have primary care and mental health capabilities. She also noted that there is a 24/7 hotline for suicide prevention; the number is 1-800-273-8255. Everyone in the Southern Arizona VA Health Care System is very committed to helping veterans.

Question: What is being done to expand mental health services in the local area (Sierra Vista). The waiting time for initial appointments and the time between recurring appointments is much too long.

Answer: Linda Reynolds noted Sierra Vista has a fulltime psychologist and one social worker. They are currently actively recruiting for two more social workers for Sierra Vista. Also Sierra Vista does have fee service capability for mental health.

Question: What is the status of funding for Tucson veterans home?

Answer:

- Commissioner Heaney advised that the 10 million set aside by the State needs renewal this year, but with budget shortfalls it will take a lot of work to get it renewed.
- Commissioner Fredericks explained that the 10 million is seed money necessary for the Feds to put us on their list for veteran home funding. We will try to use the fact that Tucson has been designated a Traumatic Brain Injury center as justification for the home to be moved up on the Fed's priority list.

Question: What is the status of VFW post VSO training?

Answer: (audience member) VFW has a new VFW National Service Officer in Phoenix who is trying to get his feet on the ground.

Question: What is the state budget situation as it relates to veterans' benefits counselors?

Answer:

- Commissioner Heaney advised that the State currently has a freeze on hiring new counselors. Director Maxon is working to reduce Arizona Department of Veterans Services' share of the planned cutbacks to reduce the budget shortfall.
- Commissioner Yamanouchi added that the proposed fair share cut was 5%; with ADVS' share being \$100,000. We appealed. Director Maxon's plan is to hire 2 or 3 VBC's at a time so they can be trained and placed. His plan "B" is to eliminate 6 VBC's (new hires) if necessary.
- Commissioner Ellis advised that a letter was sent to all state legislators to lobby them to not take so much from veterans' programs. The Governor established a Veterans' Task Force to identify veterans' needs. This resulted in authority for 40 new VBC's and 10 million for the Tucson veterans' home. That happened through efforts of this Commission. Now there is a \$1 billion deficit. We need everyone's help to preserve what we have won because the Governor originally promised veterans' items would not be cut. Now with the shortfall, we need to go to our legislators and impress on them that the veterans' community needs what we've gotten and can not afford such severe cuts. This needs support from everyone in the veterans' community.
- Commissioner Fredericks reinforced that individual support is absolutely essential. Contact should be made with every member of the Joint Legislative and Budget Committee to lobby for veterans. ADVS has already presented a plan to delay hiring all the new VBC's and postpone some non-healthcare items for the State Veteran Home. ADVS will be affected, but we need to minimize the impact if possible.

Comment: There is a Wounded Warrior Battalion being established at Ft. Huachuca. Their space and services are being cut back. Veterans' organizations need to band together to support the local Wounded Warrior Battalion at the fort. The Garrison Commander is the contact person for information and offers of assistance. The program is excellent! Ft. Huachuca's is currently only company size with 44 soldiers. Ft. Bliss TX has a Wounded Warrior Battalion with 400 soldiers; that is battalion size.

Comment: Cindy Ramos, a work study with ADVS, is 100% service connected for PTSD and can not get PTSD counseling in her area on a timely schedule. She has written a proposal to get a Vet Center in Sierra Vista. Currently Sierra Vista and Cottonwood are being considered for Vet Centers. Support from the veterans' community is needed to get the Vet Center put in Sierra Vista.

Question: Veteran wanted to know why he can't we get his combat records from WW II.

Answer: Mr. Currieo advised that there was a fire in the military archives in St Louis in 1973 and a lot of records were lost. He invited the speaker to see him after the meeting to see if the Senator's office may be of assistance.

Question: Why do reservists have only 6 months to qualify for veterans benefits.

Answer:

- Deborah Lown responded that reservists serving under presidential orders have 2 years of free VA medical care for any condition that may be related to military service. Overseas call up establishes veteran status for reservists regardless of the length of time served on active duty. They are eligible for care.
- Commissioner Yamanouchi advised that National Guard members belong to the State Governor. Upon discharge from active duty they return to the Governor's jurisdiction. Most

leave the active duty site without a discharge physical. Guard personnel need to be told to get everything done before discharge; get everything documented.

- Deborah Lown advised that VAMC Tucson tracks and meets units returning to the area. Upon separation OIF/OEF screenings are done. Six months later the medical center does follow up to catch anyone who was missed during their first drill weekend after discharge.
- Commissioner Yamanouchi added that the active duty army has agreed to see to it that all reserve and guard personnel are counseled prior to separation.
- Commissioner Fulkerson noted that Naval and Marine Corps reserve personnel are also being taken care of.
- Linda Reynolds emphasized the importance of getting the word out that reservists and guard personnel are eligible for medical care. Some conditions occur some time after the veteran returns home. Everyone needs to be proactive and encourage veterans to seek help whenever the need arises, whether at discharge or later.

Comment: A provision is needed to educate people prior to deployment; orient them to document everything and anything.

Answer:

- Deborah Lown advised that VAMC Tucson provides pre-deployment outreach to Reserve and Guard units to let them know their rights up front.
- Luella Emmons advised that a Memorandum of Understanding "MOU" was signed by multiple agencies to ensure seamless services for guard and reserve personnel deploying and returning. The medical centers reach out to guard and reserve personnel and their family members so that the family can be informed and encourage their veteran to get involved in treatment when needed. ADVS has a VBC stationed at National Guard Headquarters in Phoenix. The system is working.
- Commissioner Heaney observed that veterans' service organizations are their own worst enemies. They need to make veterans understand that they must own their conditions. They are ultimately responsible for seeking the services that they need.

Comment: Safford VA Clinic problems: no doctors, 2 nurses retired, now only one medical person, veterans have to make appointments through Tucson and the system does not work, veterans can not get appointments - they are being told that VAMC Tucson is overworked and understaffed. Also veterans' can not get hearing aids and can not get service connection for hearing loss because the Regional Office keeps losing the paperwork.

Answer: Linda Reynolds advised that the VA is having problems recruiting providers for the Safford clinic. They have been working for months trying to get providers to commit to the clinic. Providers from Sierra Vista go to Safford. Technically the Safford workload only warrants one full time provider. The medical system does not make determinations on service connection; it is a Regional Office issue. Director Gardner has a task force in place to address the many phone issues. They are being worked on. The call center is designed to be as streamlined as possible to get the caller to the right place. It is a work in progress. She also emphasized the need for educational institutions to encourage people to go into the health care fields.

Comment: Gene Fenstermacher advised the Military Officers of America (MOAA) organization has a very active legislative program. They work with the Military Coalition in Washington to prioritize issues. MOAA drafts boiler-plate emails for people to use to contact legislators. While legislators don't read emails, their staff does keep a count of the number of e-mails received on each issue. Mr. Fenstermacher has adapted MOAA's federal program to fit the State system. He sets up draft emails for people to use to communicate on State issues. Emails should be sent on Sunday night so they are on the top of the legislator's inbox on Monday morning. Anyone interested in receiving these boiler-plate emails may contact Mr. Fenstermacher at fensteg@fox.net. Even if an issue is not of personal interest, send the emails out anyway so that they may help someone else.

Comment: Everyone needs to follow up on the budget and resources issues; keep informed on issues beyond the local problems because everything the Feds do has an impact on the State.

Comment: Sierra Vista's Mayor pro tem thanked the Commissioners for coming to Sierra Vista. He noted that the budget issue is going to be very messy and earnestly encouraged everyone to work to protect veterans' benefits and services.

Comment: Veteran worked for 10 different VA's over his 35 year career, is service connected and uses the VA for his care. He noted that VAMC Tucson is one of the best VA Medical Centers in the United States. Their biggest problem is getting employees.

Comment: All we see on the news is the bad points from Iraq. Our personnel are doing wonderful work over there. When talked to personally, 99% of the troops in the field said that they are glad they were in Iraq and wanted to be there.

Comment: Bugles Across America needs to be published ahead of time so people can make plans. Answer: Chairman Dingwall noted this type of information should be passed to the Commissioners so it can be posted on our agency website.

Comment: April 2nd through 7th, the traveling Viet Nam Wall will be in Safford, sponsored by VFW Post 1085.

Question: What is the status of blue water sailors?

Answer: Deborah Lown advised that the VA Medical Center will assume that blue water Viet Nam veterans were exposed to Agent Orange and will treat them accordingly. That has nothing to do with the VA disability system.

Comment: The carillon bell tower for the State Cemetery in Sierra Vista is scheduled for installation in 2009. Fund raising efforts will be starting soon with donor incentives. A \$1000 donation will be recognized with a bronze plaque.

Chairman Dingwall announced the Good of the Order and invited the Commissioners to make comments.

- Commissioner Fulkerson advised that the Yuma Stand Down has been rescheduled to March 14 through 16 at the Yuma Sports Arena. She provided a brief explanation of the purpose and operation of a stand down: 3 day event for homeless veterans to receive showers, hot meals, clean clothes, medical, dental, legal and employment assistance. The court system is represented to clear wants and warrants. Veterans' Benefits Counselors are present to help veterans check out and file for potential VA benefits. An organization called Angels for Soldiers gives every veteran attendee a backpack with toiletries, t-shirt, socks etc.
- Commissioner McKim reminded the audience about the importance the Veterans Registry. He encouraged everyone to pick forms, complete and send them in and pass them out to other veterans for completion. It is imperative that we have accurate information on where veterans are in Arizona so that we can let legislators know the number of veterans in their respective areas.

Deborah Lown commented that Tucson holds a stand down annually in the late fall.

Chairman Dingwall again thanked The Elks for their hospitality and expressed appreciation for the active participation of the legislative staffers, Joe Larson (SAZ Cemetery Administrator) and VAMC Tucson personnel. He also thanked everyone in the audience for their attendance, noting that this has been the best attended meeting to date.

Adjournment – Chairman Dingwall adjourned the meeting at 12:10 p.m. The next regular meeting will be held at 10:00 a.m. on February 14, 2008 at the State Veteran Home, 4141 North Third Street, Phoenix, Arizona.

Respectfully submitted,

S. Lee Borgen
Acting recorder